DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 429 956 SP 038 455

AUTHOR Munchmore, James A.
TITLE Toward an Understanding Life History Research.
PUB DATE 1999-04-00
NOTE 31p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Montreal, Quebec, Canada, April 19-23, 1999).
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Research; Elementary Secondary Education; English; Generalization; Literacy Education; Personal Narratives; Research Methodology; Teacher Attitudes; *Teachers
IDENTIFIERS *Life History Method; *Teacher Thinking

ABSTRACT

This paper describes how one researcher's understanding of life history research evolved while conducting research with a high school English teacher. The life history examined the history and evolution of the teacher's beliefs about literacy and how those beliefs related to her teaching practices throughout her career. The paper begins by explaining what life history research is, then it elaborates on two experiences that helped make sense of life histories for the researcher. The first experience was around the issue of life history as an artistic interpretation (following an experience in an art museum). The second experience was a troubling conversation with a former mentor about what constituted educational research and why life history research was controversial as a topic. The paper suggests that life history and narrative research can be as robust as or more robust than quantitative studies in terms of trustworthiness, and it notes that it can produce knowledge or insights that could be generalized to other teachers. The paper concludes by arguing for the importance of life history research. (Contains 58 references.) (SM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 429 956

TOWARD AN UNDERSTANDING LIFE HISTORY RESEARCH

James A. Muchmore

Western Michigan University

2110 Sangren Hall
Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, MI 49001
Office: (616) 387-2889
FAX: (616) 382-2882

james.muchmore@wmich.edu

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

J. Muchmore

5/20384455

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Montreal, April, 1999.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

TOWARD AN UNDERSTANDING OF LIFE HISTORY RESEARCH

During the past decade, there has been an increasing interest among educational researchers in understanding the lives of teachers (e.g., Ball & Goodson, 1985; Goodson, 1992; Witherell & Noddings, 1991)—including the ways they think about their subject matter (Stodolsky, 1988) and curriculum in general (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988). Important in this work is an emphasis on understanding teachers' thinking from *their* perspective—from the perspective of an *insider* looking around, and not from that of an *outsider* looking in. Such an emphasis has resulted in an increase in the use of life history and narrative approaches in studies of teacher thinking and teacher socialization (see, e.g., Carter, 1993; Casey, 1995; Clandinin & Connelly, 1996; Elbaz, 1990; Goodson, 1992).

In line with this kind of research, for five years, I was involved in a collaborative research relationship with Anna,[1] an experienced high school English teacher in Detroit, Michigan. Utilizing a life history approach, I explored the history and evolution of Anna's beliefs about literacy, and how these beliefs have related to her teaching practices throughout her career. This project served as my dissertation at The University of Michigan.

Throughout my study, I conducted numerous audio-recorded interviews and conversations with Anna and made frequent visits to her classroom in the role of a participant observer. Under her direction, I also spoke with several of her friends, relatives, colleagues, and past and present students—all of whom were familiar, to varying degrees, with her teaching practices and her outward thinking about literacy. In addition, Anna

[1] A pseudonym

provided me with a collection of academic papers that she had written throughout her career in which she had discussed various issues related to literacy and teaching. She also provided me with copies of an assortment of professional documents—including newspaper clippings about her, and past and present evaluations of her teaching conducted by her supervisors. Taken together, all of this information enabled me to construct an in-depth portrait of Anna's life as a teacher with a particular focus on her beliefs and practices.

In this chapter, I discuss some of the ways in which my understanding of life history research evolved while I was conducting my research with Anna.

What is Life History Research?

Although it can be traced to the informal life stories of Native Americans in the nineteenth century (Polkinghorne, 1988) and to later more sophisticated works such as Thomas and Znaniecki's *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (1927) and Shaw's *The Jack-Roller* (1930), life history research has never been widely accepted by mainstream researchers in the social sciences (e.g., Becker, 1978; Bertaux, 1983; Faraday & Plummer, 1979; Fischer, 1983). Typically plagued by apparent "problems" with validity, reliability, and generalizability, it has long existed on the fringes of methodological acceptability—often being relegated to the role of simply providing a bit of color in studies based on "more rigorous" methodologies. Recently, however, researchers such as Denzin (1989a), Donmoyer (1990), Eisner (1991), Guba and Lincoln (1989), and Kirk and Miller (1986), have begun to question the appropriateness of using concepts such as validity, reliability, and generalizability as criteria for evaluating qualitative inquiry. As a result, life history research has experienced somewhat of a resurgence in the past several years, especially in the field of education (see, e.g., Casey, 1993;

Cohen, 1991; Cole, 1994; Cole & Knowles, 1994; Goodson, 1992; Knowles, 1994).[2]

Epistemologically, life history research has a basis in the sociological tradition of symbolic interactionism in which meaning is viewed as a social creation achieved through human interactions that are mediated by language or symbols. According to Blumer (1969), this concept rests on three basic premises:

> The first premise is that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them.... The second premise is that the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows. The third premise is that these meanings are handled in, and modified through an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters (p. 2).

In essence, doing life history research is an interpretive endeavor, much like reading a text.

The metaphor of a life as a text is rooted in the work of anthropologists such as Winner (1978), Geertz (1983), Bruner (1986), Boon (1986), and Brown (1987) who argue that human experiences can only be expressed and understood through symbolic statements which are in essence social texts. Whether oral or written, these texts are fictional narrative productions that enable individuals to make sense of their lives and to share this sense with others. For example, in writing this paper, I am transforming my lived experiences into a work of fiction. It is fiction because no matter how completely I tell it and no matter how closely you (the reader) read it, you can

---

[2]Closely related to this resurgence is the rise of narrative inquiry (see, e.g., Beattie, 1995, Casey, 1995, Clandinin & Connelly, 1986, Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, 1991, Carter, 1993). Like life history research, narrative inquiry focuses on the stories that people tell in order to make sense of their lives. Narrative inquiry, however, focuses only on the stories that people tell without considering historical context. Life history, on the other hand, refers to the in-depth study of a person's life story *and* the context in which in which it was experienced.

never experience it in the same way that I did—nor, for that matter, will I ever be able to re-experience it in exactly the same way that I did when it originally occurred. Instead, acting together, we are jointly constructing a unique fictional version of my lived experience.

When lives are viewed as texts, it becomes especially inappropriate to evaluate the efficacy of the life history approach by the same standards of objectivity, validity, reliability, and generalizability—which are the hallmarks of science. Instead, it is much more appropriate to evaluate the goodness of this research by some of the same standards that we use in reader response literary criticism. For example, critics such as Iser (1978), Tompkins (1980), and Fish (1980) argue against the notion of objective interpretations, proposing instead that a text cannot be understood apart from the effect that it has on a reader. The text, they argue, does not determine interpretation; rather the interpretation determines the text. Holland (1980) states,

> ...all of us, as we read, use the literary work to symbolize and finally to replicate ourselves. We work out through the text our own characteristic patterns of desire and adaptation. We interact with the work, making it part of our own psychic economy and making ourselves part of the literary work—as we interpret it. For, always, this principle prevails: identity re-creates itself (p. 24).

When applied to life history research, Holland's idea suggests that researchers do not simply compile someone's life history as if it were an objective entity that exists outside the interactions in which it is elicited. Instead, it is always jointly constructed by the participant and the researcher (see Gudmundsdottir, 1992). Because the only way that a researcher can make sense of someone's life is through the lenses of his or her own experiences, the resulting life history is always as much the researcher's story as it is the participant's.

Two Epiphanies

None of these ideas about life history research made much sense to me when I first began my research with Anna—so deeply was my thinking rooted in the values and epistemology of science. What exactly did it mean to be a joint constructor of a life story? Telling one's story was like filling a container with water, I thought. You pour it out; it lands in the container; and there it stands, ready to be analyzed. Intuitively, I liked the idea of doing life history research; it resonated with my childhood memories of listening to the family stories that my grandmother told. However, I had serious misgivings about using an approach that seemed so "soft" and "unscientific." It was not until I had two particularly poignant experiences or epiphanies (Denzin, 1989a)—one in an art museum and the other in a troubling conversation with a former mentor—that I finally began to shed my discomfort. In the remainder of this chapter, I elaborate upon these two experiences through an extended autobiographical account of my personal struggle to accept life history research as a legitimate research methodology.

Life history research as an artistic interpretation

My first epiphany occurred in the unlikely setting of an art gallery. While attending a conference at Wayne State University, in Detroit, in April, 1992, I casually wandered into an area where some graduate students in the Fine Arts Program were displaying their work. It was a small room, close to the site of the conference, and a friend and I had entered simply to pass the time while awaiting the start of the next session. The walls were covered with various paintings—some of them abstract and others more traditional—and several sculptures rested upon pedestals that were scattered throughout the room. All of it seemed very ordinary. We hastily glanced at a few of the pieces

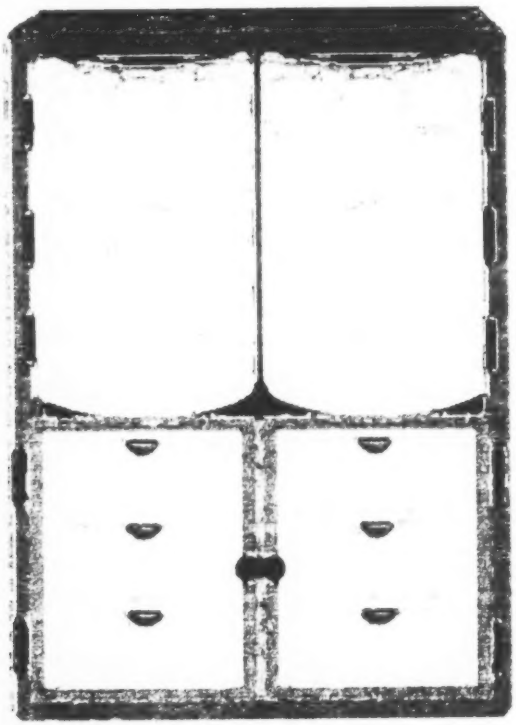
and were about to leave when I suddenly noticed a peculiar object mounted on the back wall. It was a wooden box, about the size of a medicine cabinet, and it contained two large porcelain doors. Obviously hand-molded before they had been fired and hardened, these porcelain doors contained an unusual series of symmetrical cells, much like a honeycomb, which gave the entire object a strangely organic quality. It was almost as if the box had sprouted from the wall naturally, rather than being constructed by human hands and placed there deliberately.

Moving closer, I studied its appearance and wondered what this thing was supposed to be. Old and weathered, the wood invited my touch—yet I was reluctant to do so. "Art is for viewing, not for touching," I thought. I paused for a moment and nervously glanced over my shoulder. No one was looking, so I quickly reached out and moved my fingers along the rough wooden surface. Nothing happened. No alarms sounded and no one shouted at me to stop, so I ventured further and peered behind one of the porcelain doors.

It did not take much effort for me to open the door; it was perfectly balanced. Someone had obviously crafted it with a great deal of care. As the heavy porcelain door slowly swung open, I was startled to see a person staring back out of me. It was a photograph of a young man. It looked like a high school yearbook picture, which had been blown up to a much larger size and then embossed on a thin, irregular layer of porcelain. I opened the other door to get a better look. The photograph was old, probably from the late 1960s or early 1970s, but the student's expression was timeless. With long dark hair and the faint beginnings of a mustache, he struck a rather defiant pose. It was a familiar look—a look of student resistance—which I knew well from my own days as a public school teacher. "He's a 'burn-out,'" I thought, instantly

assigning a meaning to the photograph. Moving closer, I noticed a small crack in the porcelain emanating from one of the student's eyes and gradually thickening as it spread across his face to the edge of the porcelain—a pristine photograph, marred by a jagged crack. "Yes," I thought, "this student must be the archetype of a high school 'burnout.'" That must be what the artist is trying to depict. I thought I had figured it out.

While I stood there looking at this photograph, I suddenly noticed two additional doors beneath the photograph—these made of glass—and through them I could see what looked like six small drawers. I wondered what, if anything, might be inside them. I wanted to look, but I felt uncomfortable. "But the artist must have intended for viewers to interact with his work," I



The object.

reasoned. "Otherwise, he would not have put hinges on the doors, and he would not have placed it in such a public location."

Nervously glancing over my shoulder once again, I quickly opened the two glass doors and pulled out one of the drawers. My heart beat faster as I peered inside. I fully expected someone to yell, "Hey, don't touch that!" Again, however, the warning never came—and I was able to look closely at the contents. Inside the drawer, there were a couple of small, laminated cards. The first one said:

Student Identification Card
Highland Park High School, 1968-69
Steve Lenzo, Age 15, Grade 10.

There was a photograph on this card, which I immediately recognized as the same boy whose picture was embossed on the porcelain. I picked up the card and held it in my hand. Suddenly, this boy was no longer an anonymous "burn-out."

The other card was much newer. It showed a grown man with short-cropped hair, a beard, and glasses. He hardly resembled the boy in the first picture, but the name was the same. "Steven Lenzo," it said, "South Bronx High School."

"So the boy must have become a teacher," I thought, realizing that my initial interpretation may have been wrong. After all, burnouts did not become teachers, did they? I now had two pieces of information, and the young man's life began to take on a new meaning.

In search of additional clues, I reached deeper into the same drawer and found a tattered old report card. It contained the following grades:

Advanced Biology	*A*
Geometry I	*A*
Spanish I	*A*
Physical Education	*A*

World Culture	*A*
Speech	*B*

These were definitely not the grades of a burnout—all "A"s and one "B." I wondered how my initial impression could have been so wrong.

By now, since no one had challenged me, I was less concerned about interacting with this work of art. I simply wanted to know more about this person, Steven Lenzo. Who was he? Who was the artist? What was the artist's intention in creating this box? Inside another drawer, I found a silver whistle on an old frayed lanyard, just like the one that I still have from my former days as a high school track coach. "Perhaps he was a coach too," I thought. In posing this question, I was conscious of how subjective my interpretations had been so far. Instead of *uncovering* Steve Lenzo's life, or "pouring it into a container," I realized that I was actually *creating* a version of his life—one that was inextricably linked to my own, for it was through the lens of my own life experiences that I was making sense of these objects.

Beneath the whistle, there was an envelope which seemed to contain a note. Pausing before opening it, I once again began to feel uneasy—as if I had broken into someone's house and was rummaging through their private possessions. I felt like an intruder of sorts. First, I had opened the porcelain doors. Then, I had opened the glass doors and pulled out a drawer. Now, I was about to breach yet another barrier by opening this envelope. I wondered if I had gone too far. After all, who was I to poke around this man's personal possessions? But then I remembered where I was. I was in an art gallery—a public place—and this wooden box was being displayed as a work of art. Nevertheless, I was still very nervous as I opened the envelope and pulled out the slip of paper. It was a memo typed on a half-sheet of stationary from Highland Park High School. Frail and yellow with age, it said:

To: Steve Lenzo
From: All the students of HPHS
Subject: Long Hair

Since school opened, we have tolerated your long hair without complaining, but you have let it go too far. We hereby officially ask you to get a haircut. If it is not cut within ten days, we will have to cut it ourselves.
FAIR WARNING

Sincerely,
Highland Park High School

"Surely this must have been a joke," I thought. "Perhaps he was a burnout after all. Or was he?" I read it again more carefully. *From: All the students of HPHS...* "Yes, it must have been a joke." Otherwise, it probably would have been signed by a single person—the principal perhaps—not the high school at large. "Steve Lenzo must have had a good sense of humor," I thought, "or at least his classmates did." I carefully refolded the slip of paper, inserted it back in the envelope, and returned it to the drawer.

Opening the next drawer, I found five photographs. The first one was of a smiling adolescent who looked like the boy in the porcelain yearbook picture, only he was younger and his hair was much shorter. "1964 World's Fair," it said on the back. The second picture revealed a much older version of the same boy, now grown and holding a baby. Could this be Steve's child? Next, there was a black and white photograph of him standing next to a young woman. Perhaps this was his wife, or at least the mother of the child. I hoped the two remaining pictures would provide some definitive answers. One showed a different man—definitely not Steve—holding a different baby. Who was this man? A friend? A brother? I did not know. The final picture revealed a wrecked car—horribly twisted, almost beyond recognition. Perhaps Steve had been killed in this car. Maybe this whole work of art was intended to serve as a memorial to him. I did not know.

Opening another drawer, I found a whole new set of artifacts that further confounded my ongoing interpretations. There was a Washtenaw County Sheriff's Department patch, along with a passport and some foreign money. What did this mean? Had Steve been a law enforcement officer? Had he traveled overseas? Then, I saw a letter written in Spanish and a leather necklace laced with a large blue stone. What did it mean? The drawers were like a row of windows to a large room, and each time I peered into a different one, the view was slightly altered.

Coming to the last drawer, I hoped that I would finally be able to make sense of everything—but instead I encountered only a few more scattered pieces of this man's life. There was a crumpled draft card, a collection of seeds, and a pocket-sized "Smoky-the-Bear" calendar book for the current year. No answers here, just more questions. Had he dodged the draft? Perhaps he had fled to Mexico during the Vietnam War. And what about the seeds? Could they be drugs? I now envisioned Steve as a burn-out again—perhaps evading the draft and hanging out in Central America.

The last item was a stamped envelope with a very recent postmark. Inside, I found a letter that had been handwritten on a single white sheet of stationary, and, as I read it, the whole story once again began to take on a new meaning. It said:

Dear Peter,

Sorry it has taken me so long to package this. We just got back from a four day trip to Portland, combined business and pleasure trip. Joe B. was great even during the nine hour car ride. We saw lots of my old friends, their kids, and spent a couple of nights in a hotel in downtown Portland. Took Joe. B. to the zoo too, he liked the monkeys. Here's a brief explanation of the enclosed items.

(1) Cards from South Bronx and Highland Park High School.
(2) Canceled passport from trips to Switzerland and Central America.

(3) The photo Jennifer and I used for our wedding invitation.
(4) Sheriff's patch from my corrections officer uniform.
(5) Draft card from 1972.
(6) Resolution from Honduras Forest Service declaring the town of El Porvenir's watershed to be protected forest zone.
(7) A 50 Cordoba note from Nicaragua worth about a penny in 1987.
(8) Whistle I used while lifeguarding at Savyatich, 1972.
(9) Jade necklace of carved foot supposed a Mayan relic given me by an anthropology student in Guatemala.
(10) A coin from Peru (1/2 sol).
(11) Some grass seeds known as "lagrima de san Pedro" in Honduras and worn around baby's necks to ward off evil spirits.
(12) The Smoky calendar is for you.

Love,
Steve

After the conference at Wayne State had ended, I went home to Ann Arbor, but could not stop thinking about my experience with this work of art. I wanted to know more about Steven Lenzo and the artist, Peter, who had chronicled his life. Early the next morning, I drove back to Detroit and returned to the gallery. When I got there, however, I was surprised to find that the work of art was gone. It had disappeared. In fact, the entire room was empty; nothing remained. It was as if I had dreamed the whole thing. Going into a nearby office, I saw a secretary and asked her what had happened to the exhibit. Before she could reply, I imagined her saying, "I don't know what you're talking about. There hasn't been an art exhibit in this building for years." That would have been too eric! Instead, she provided a much more plausible explanation. The exhibit was over, and all of the artists had removed their work earlier that morning.

"Was a guy named Peter here?" I asked.

"You must mean Peter Lenzo," she said. "Yes, he was here. In fact, I think he's still in the building.

"What does he look like?"

"He's a tall man in his late thirties with long dark hair pulled back into ponytail. You can't miss him."

Armed with this information, I raced back out into a hall and immediately spotted a man walking toward me who fit the description.

"Are you Peter Lenzo?" I shouted.

"Yes, I am," he replied with an inquisitive look on his face. "What can I do for you?"

"My name is Jim Muchmore," I said. "I'm a graduate student at The University of Michigan. I saw your work yesterday, and it made a really strong an impression on me. I came back for another look."

Peter smiled as I spoke, and we then had a long conversation about his work. He told me that he called his wooden box a "reliquary," meaning that it was a receptacle or repository for keeping or storing artifacts. He said that he had made several of these reliquaries—one for each of his siblings in order to repay them for helping to support him while he was in graduate school. This particular exhibit, he told me, had also served as his final project for his Master of Fine Arts Degree (Lenzo, 1992). He smiled when I told him how I had interacted with it—how I had touched it—and he seemed amused by my reaction. He explained that all of his work was intensely personal, yet he had purposely designed it to be as inviting as possible. He wanted people to struggle, as I had, with the tension between wanting to explore it and feeling that it was wrong.

After briefly chatting about his family, Peter invited me back to his studio to let me re-explore his brother's reliquary.[3] It looked different resting on the studio floor. It seemed smaller and much less mysterious. Yet, as soon as I opened the drawers and started examining the artifacts, I once again found myself trying to piece together Steve's life—this time with the added knowledge gained from my conversation with Peter. With each new encounter, the artifacts took on a slightly different meaning. For instance, Peter told me that Steve was once involved in a serious automobile accident. The entire car had been destroyed, yet he had miraculously survived—his only injury being a large circular bruise on his chest caused by the impact of his body against the steering wheel. I thought about this story when I saw the picture of the wrecked car again, and I remembered a similar event in my own life in which my head had shattered the windshield during a head-on auto accident when I was in college. I walked away from that accident completely unscathed—no cuts, no bruises, not even a bump.

In making this reliquary, Peter collaborated with his brother to create a kind of living portfolio. Each object told a different story, and it was my job as the interpreter to piece them together to form a unified whole. The soundness of my interpretations rested not on their consistency with an objective truth, but instead on their own internal consistency—the extent to which they made sense within a particular context. I came to this interpretive endeavor with a unique set of personal experiences that helped to inform my initial impressions of his brother—impressions that continually changed and re-formulated with the discovery of each new artifact, until, eventually, my

[3]Recognizing the very personal nature of Peter's work and the information that it contained, I contacted him again via telephone on April 27, 1995, and received his permission to describe it here.

interpretations could account for all of the information at hand. Heavily influenced by my own life history, as well as the time and context of my encounter, my interpretations were highly subjective and idiosyncratic. Another person might have seen things quite differently, or if I had encountered the work of art at a different time or in a different place, I too might have constructed a very different version of Steve's life—for as Denzin (1989b) states, "No reading or writing of a life is ever complete or final.... There can only be multiple versions of a biography or autobiography" (p. 46-47).

"That's not research!"

About a year-and-a-half after my encounter with Peter Lenzo's art, I had another epiphany that helped to shape my understanding of life history research; however, this one was not nearly so pleasant. It was the summer of 1993, and I had dropped in on one of my former professors at my old undergraduate university. I had stayed in touch with him over the years and liked to visit with him whenever I was in town. I viewed him as a mentor of sorts.

My visit began on a friendly basis. First, he told me about some of the courses he was teaching, while I told him about some of my work at The University of Michigan. But when the conversation turned toward my dissertation, the tenor of our interaction suddenly changed.

"I'm doing a life history study of one teacher exploring her beliefs and practices," I said. "She's an excellent teacher, with twenty-five years of experience, and she has a very unique, student-centered approach. I'm really interested in finding out how she got to this point in her career..." No sooner had these words left my mouth than I saw his eyes narrow and his jaw stiffen. I could tell that he did not approve.

"That's not research," he interrupted, without allowing me to finish. He then launched into an extended oration about the perceived shortcomings of interpretive research. The vehemence of his comments caught me completely off-guard. "What good does it do to study one teacher?" he asked. "How does that contribute to the research base on teacher thinking? Everyone walking down the street has a set of beliefs that guide their actions. So what! What makes this one teacher worth studying—as opposed to any other teacher? And how can you ever make generalizations when your sample size is only one? What bothers me about this kind of 'research' is that people tend to write nothing more than compelling stories to support whatever position they already hold. I'm sorry, but that's not rigorous; that's not objective; and that's not research!"

I tried to defend my position, but he would not stop long enough for me to reply—and even if he had, I doubt that he would have listened. He appeared to be very upset—bitter even—that interpretive research had attained a stature of credibility within the field of education, and he seemed in no mood for a polite discussion. He had never spoken to me like this before, and I was quite taken aback. This one-sided conversation continued until I finally realized that we were not going to be able to mend our difference and part on good terms. This was the end of our relationship. The damage had been done, and there was no turning back.

I have not revisited that professor since I left his office that day, and I probably never will. However, I still think about what he said—and I often think about how I would have responded if I could go back and relive that moment. There were two main points to his criticism. First, he seemed to feel that life history and narrative research were less rigorous than more traditional forms of educational research—that they were somehow more

susceptible to the individual biases of the researcher. There was nothing to prevent a person, he seemed to feel, from simply writing a piece of fiction with no basis in an actual experience and then presenting it as being true. In other words, he felt that life history research did not measure up to the validity criteria of the more traditional forms of educational research that dealt with hypothesis testing, cause-and-effective relationships, and standardized procedures.

Second, he seemed to feel that an in-depth study of one teacher was not research because it did not produce knowledge or insights that could be generalized to other teachers. The goal of educational research, he felt, is to produce a body of knowledge from which human behavior can be predicted and controlled--and a necessary component for this outcome is random sampling, which means that the subjects in a study must be indiscriminately selected from among all the individuals in a given population. And, the sample size must be large enough to subdue the impact of those subjects who may be unusual in some way or otherwise not representative of the population from which they were drawn. In essence, the goal of this kind of research is to characterize the average, not to study the unique.

If given the opportunity, I would have told my former professor that these criticisms were rooted in the epistemological assumptions of mainstream quantitative social science, not symbolic interactionism.

It is tempting for interpretive researchers to simply dismiss concepts such as validity and generalizability as being inappropriate criteria for judging the goodness of their work (see Kvale, 1989). However, at the risk of resurrecting a tired and worn-out debate between quantitative and qualitative methods, I feel that my former professor raised some important questions that need to be addressed. For example, how do interpretive researchers

warrant their knowledge claims, if not by comparing them to an objective reality? If validity is an irrelevant concept, then how do we distinguish between a study that "gets it right" and one that "misses the mark?" And, what is the purpose of interpretive research if not to produce knowledge that can be generalized to other people, places, and times?

To answer these questions, it is important to first understand how researchers who work with cause-and-effect relationships warrant their knowledge claims and generalize their findings. Campbell and Stanley (1966) distinguish between two kinds of validity—internal and external—which mirror the concerns voiced by my former professor. Internal validity is achieved when the results of a study can be attributed exclusively to the independent variables and not to any other variables that were not controlled, while external validity is achieved when a causal relationship between two variables can be generalized to different groups of people in different settings at different times. According to Cook and Campbell (1979), there are several specific threats to each kind of validity—including history, maturation, testing, selection, mortality, and others for internal validity, and various statistical interaction effects for external validity—and it is the responsibility of the researcher to systematically rule out each of these threats in order to ensure the validity and generalizability of his or her study.

In practice, however, Mishler (1990) points out that there is no universal procedure for ensuring the trustworthiness of any study; there is no cookbook recipe to follow. Indeed, Cook and Campbell (1979) readily admit that it is entirely the responsibility of the researcher to weigh, analyze, and evaluate the relative merits of each of these threats in making knowledge claims. In other words, it is admittedly a highly subjective process, which, unfortunately, tends to be obscured by the objective, third-person style of

writing found in many research reports. My former professor might argue that this subjectivity is inconsequential—that as long as the results can be reproduced by other researchers who work independently, we can be reasonably certain that the results are valid. But reliability is no guarantor of validity. As Kirk and Miller (1986) observe, it is possible for researchers to be reliably wrong.

In addition, readers of traditional research reports are often provided with such scant information about the way that the study was actually conducted—receiving instead "an idealized version of *the* scientific method" (Mishler, 1990, p. 423)—that they usually have little or no basis for judging the author's knowledge claims, other than to accept his or her word that they are indeed valid. This blind faith in the integrity of the researcher, masked by an artificial aura of objectivity, can sometimes have disastrous results, such as in the case where a University of Michigan doctoral student in genetics fabricated data in a series of major leukemia studies (Wahlberg, 1996). According to his academic advisor, this student was considered to be an extremely capable researcher; he had been hand-picked to work on a project sponsored by the prestigious Center for Human Genome Research of the National Institute of Health in Bethesda, Maryland. "I had no evidence, in frequent interactions with the individual over the course of three years, to question his honesty," the advisor wrote in a painful letter of apology to his colleagues. "Even in retrospect, I am not sure how these deceptions could have been uncovered sooner" (p. A8). Through his statement, the advisor was tacitly admitting that there were few safeguards for ensuring the validity of a study should a dishonest scientist decide to fabricate data—a position which challenges my former professor's contention that interpretative

research is somehow more susceptible to fabrication (intentional or otherwise).

In fact, life history and narrative research may actually be *more* robust than quantitative studies in terms of trustworthiness. According to Charmaz (1995), ethnographers and qualitative researchers work with data that is "self-correcting" (p. 51). "We get closer to lived experience than journalists and than most of our colleagues in the social sciences," she says. "Because our analyses *start* with our research participant's meanings, intentions and actions, we are much less likely to force our data into preconceived categories" (p. 51). In contrast, quantitative models of research *require* fitting the data into preconceived categories, which may distort or misrepresent the issues or questions that the research participants themselves deem most important (Charmaz, 1995). When researchers live and work with their subjects over an extended period of time and shape their analyses through a collaborative effort, the chance that they will "get it wrong" is greatly reduced.

Even if a life history researcher were to fabricate an account in the same way that the geneticist fabricated his data, it still may possess merit—for the more important question to ask in evaluating a story is not, "Is it true?" but instead, "What does it mean?"[4] For example, a novel which is not true in a literal sense can nevertheless have a profound meaning for those who read it. I immediately think of Jesse Stuart's *The Thread That Runs So True* (1949) and Leo Tolstoy's *Childhood, Boyhood, and Youth* (1912)—both semi-fictional autobiographies, one of a teacher and the other of a student, which have strongly impacted my thinking about education and influenced my

[4]I draw this idea from the work of John Shelby Spong (1991), an Episcopalian Bishop who maintains that literal interpretations of the *Bible* trivialize the powerful experiences conveyed by those who wrote it.

practice as a teacher. A fabricated life history—if plausible, well-written, and internally coherent—can still have value for those who choose to read it, while a fabricated study on the genetic origins of leukemia is fatally flawed.[5]

The second part of my former professor's criticism—that researchers cannot make generalizations from an in-depth study of one teacher—is based on a limited notion of generalizability. Firestone (1993) identifies three broad arguments for generalizing from data—sample-to-population extrapolation, analytic generalization, and case-to-case transfer. I feel that my former professor was relying exclusively upon the first argument while ignoring the latter two. Sample-to-population extrapolation is based upon probability theory, which assumes that the characteristics of a randomly drawn sample are statistically equivalent to the characteristics of the population from which it was drawn. This kind of generalizability is most commonly associated with opinion surveys and quasi-experimental studies.

The second argument, analytic generalization, is made when researchers attempt to generalize the findings of a particular study to a broader theory. For instance, Grossman (1989, 1990) used a case study approach to explore the theory that college graduates could become successful teachers without taking subject-specific teaching methods courses. After studying six beginning English teachers—three of whom had been through a teacher education program while the other three had not—she concluded that subject-specific pedagogical coursework made a positive difference in the ways in which these teachers approached their subject matter and taught their students, and she suggested that policy makers should think twice before

---

[5]It is important to note that I do not consider it to be ethical for a researcher to intentionally deceive readers by misrepresenting his or her work. Instead, my point is simply that the ultimate value of a story lies in the meaning that it has for individual readers, not in its literal correspondence to an objective truth.

waiving teacher certification requirements that include traditional university-based teacher preparation. While this kind of study, with just six subjects, does not allow the author to make sample-to-population generalizations, it does "help provide the analyses necessary to build a richer conceptualization of the teacher education curriculum and its influence on how prospective teachers learn to teach" (Grossman, 1990, p. 147).

According to Firestone (1993), the third argument for generalizability, case-to-case transfer, is probably the least familiar to educational researchers. It occurs when "a person in one setting considers adopting a program or idea from another one" (Firestone, 1993, p. 17). For example, when I read Jesse Stuart's (1949) fictionalized account of his life as teacher in rural Kentucky during the 1920s, I transferred many of his ideas and experiences to my own situation as a teacher in the 1980s. Although the times and settings of our experiences were very different, his writing nevertheless inspired in me a way of thinking about children and teaching that ultimately transcended these differences. In fact, as a beginning teacher, I found this kind of writing to be much more useful in helping me to deal with the everyday problems of teaching than the numerous studies on teacher effectiveness that were included in my college coursepacks.

One explanation for why this third argument for generalizability tends to be more obscure than the other two is that the responsibility for making judgments about what generalizes from setting to setting rests with the reader instead of with the writer (Erickson, 1992). Because contextual circumstances always vary from setting to setting, it is simply impossible for a researcher to provide accurate judgments about the extent to which his or her findings might be generalized to other situations. Even in quasi-experimental studies—with large, randomly-selected samples—researchers can only speak

of averages and general tendencies, not specific applications from one case to another. And, in the field of education, it is ultimately individual cases with which we are most concerned.

Drawing upon the language of Piaget's schema theory—with terms such as assimilation, accommodation, integration, and differentiation—Donmoyer (1990) argues that reading a single case can provide us with a vicarious experience which we can then transfer to other situations in our own lives. Case studies can expand our horizons by taking us to distant or exotic places where we may not otherwise be able to go. Few people would deny that books and stories have this power. For example, in reading Tolstoy's *Childhood, Boyhood, and Youth*, I traveled back in time—to Russia in the 1830s and 1840s—and emerged with a rich understanding of what it was like to be a young aristocrat in that particular time and place. Reading case studies also enables us to see the world from another person's point of view. They enrich our understanding of a phenomenon by allowing us to experience it from a perspective that is different from our own. For instance, by reading Peshkin's (1986) study of a fundamentalist Christian school, I gained a unique insight into this phenomenon which I may not have otherwise experienced—even if I had visited the same fundamentalist school myself. In addition, we are more likely to learn from vicarious experiences because they tend to be less threatening than direct encounters. As Donmoyer notes, people often become defensive when they are challenged by new ideas or novel experiences. A teacher who reads a narrative account of the discipline problems faced by another teacher would likely feel less threatened than if he or she were initially asked to confront similar kinds of problems in his or her own classroom.

Generalizability has not traditionally been considered to be a strength of interpretive research—especially when this term has been narrowly defined as making extrapolations from a sample to population (Firestone, 1993). However, when the concept of generalizability is expanded to include the kind of learning that occurs when we learn something in a particular situation and then apply it to similar situations, it is clear that interpretive research possesses a tremendous strength in this area that has hitherto been under-appreciated. Life history research in particular—with its narrative structure and literary quality—is especially well-suited for fostering this kind of learning. This is what I would have liked to have told my former professor, if he had given me the chance.

References

Ball, S. J., & Goodson, I. F. (1985). *Teachers' lives and careers.* London: The Falmer Press.

Beattie, M. (1995). New prospects for teacher education: Narrative ways of knowing teaching and teacher learning. *Educational Research, 37,* 53-70.

Becker, H. S. (1978). The relevance of life histories. In N. K. Denzin (Ed.), *Sociological methods: A sourcebook* (pp. 289-296). New York: Magraw-Hill.

Bertaux, D. (Ed.) (1983). *Biography and society: The life history approach in the social sciences.* Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic interactionism: Perspective and method.* Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall

Boon, J. A. (1986). Symbols, sylphs, and siwa: Allegorical machineries in the text of Balinese culture. In V. W. Turner & E. M. Bruner (Eds.), *The anthropology of experience,* pp. 239-260. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.

Brown, R. H. (1987). *Society as text: Essays on rhetoric, reason, and reality.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Bruner, E. M. (1983). Experience and its Expressions. In V. W. Turner & E. M. Bruner (Eds.), *The anthropology of experience* (pp. 3-30). Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.

Campbell, D. T., & Stanley, J. C. (1966). *Experimental and quasi-experimental designs for research.* Chicago: Rand McNally.

Carter, K. (1993). The place of story in the study of teaching and teacher education. *Educational Researcher, 22* (1), 5-12, 18.

Casey, K. (1993). *I answer with my life: Life histories of women teachers working for social change.* New York : Routledge.

Casey, K. (1995). The new narrative research in education. *Review of Research in Education, 21,* 211-253

Charmez, K. (1995). Between positivism and postmodernism: Implications for methods. *Symbolic Interaction, 17,* 43-72.

Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (1986). Rhythms in teaching: The narrative study of teachers' personal practical knowledge of classrooms. *Teaching & Teacher Education, 2* (4), 377-387.

Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (1996). Teachers' professional knowledge landscapes: Teacher stories—stories of teachers—school stories—stories of schools. *Educational Researcher, 25* (3), 24-30.

Cohen, R. M. (1991). *A lifetime of teaching: Portraits of five veteran high school teachers.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Cole, A. L. (1994, April). *Doing life history research—In theory and in practice.* Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans.

Cole, A., & Knowles, J. G. (1994, April). *Personal histories, professional practices: Methods and examples of self-study.* Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans.

Connelly, F. M., & Clandinin, D. J. (1988). *Teachers as curriculum planners: Narratives of experience.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Connelly, F. M., & Clandinin, D. J. (1990). Stories of experience and narrative inquiry. *Educational Researcher, 19,* 2-14.

Connelly, F. M., & Clandinin, D. J. (1991). Narrative inquiry: Storied experience. In E. C. Short (Ed.), *Forms of curriculum inquiry* (pp. 121-153). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Cook, T. D., & Campbell, D. T. (1979). *Quasi-experimentation: Design and analysis issues for field settings.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Denzin, N. K. (1989a). *Interpretive biography.* Sage University Paper Series on Qualitative Research Methods, Vol. 17. Beverly Hills, CA.

Denzin, N. K. (1989b). *Interpretive interactionism* (Sage University Paper Series on Applied Social Research Methods, Vol. 16). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Donmoyer, R. (1990). Generalizability and the single-case study. In E. Eisner & A. Peshkin (Eds.), *Qualitative inquiry in education: The continuing debate* (pp. 175-200). New York: Teachers College Press.

Eisner, E. W. (1991). *The enlightened eye: Qualitative inquiry and the enhancement of educational practice.* New York: Macmillan.

Elbaz, F. (1983). *Teacher thinking: A study of practical knowledge.* London: Croom Helm.

Erickson, F. (1992). Why the clinical trial doesn't work as a metaphor for educational research: A response to Schrag. *Educational Researcher, 21* (5), 9-11.

Faraday, A., & Plummer, K. (1979). Doing life histories. *Sociological Review, 27*, 773-798.

Firestone, W. A. (1993). Alternative arguments for generalizing from data as applied to qualitative research. *Educational Researcher, 22* (4), 16-23.

Fischer, L. R. (1983). Sociology and life history: Methodlogical incongruence? *International Journal of Oral History, 4*, 29-40.

Fish, S. (1980). *Is there a text in this class? The authority of interpretive communities*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Geertz, C. (1983). *Local knowledge: Further essays in interpretive anthropology*. New York: Basic Books.

Goodson, I. (Ed.) (1992). *Studying teachers' lives*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Goodson, I. (Ed.) (1992). *Studying teachers' lives*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Grossman, P. L. (1989). A study in contrast: Sources of pedagogical content knowledge for secondary English. *Journal of Teacher Education, 40* (5), 24-31.

Grossman, P. L. (1990). *The making of a teacher: Teacher knowledge and teacher education*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1989). *Personal communication*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Gudmundsdottir, S. (1992, April). *The interview as a joint construction of reality*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco.

Holland, N. N. (1980). Unity identity text self. In J. P. Tompkins (Ed.), *Reader-response criticism: From formalism to post-structuralism* (pp. 118-133). Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Iser, W. (1978). The act of reading: *A theory of aesthetic response*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Kirk, J., & Miller, M. L. (1986). *Reliability and validity in qualitative research* (Sage University Paper Series on Qualitative Research Methods, Vol. 1). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Knowles, J. G. (1994). Metaphors as windows on a personal history: A beginning teacher's experience. *Teacher Education Quarterly, 21* (1), 37-66.

Kvale, S. (1989). To validate is to question. In S. Kvale (Ed.), *Issues of validity in qualitative research* (pp. 73-92). Lund, Sweden: Studentlitteratur.

Lenzo, P. (1992, April 4). Master of Fine Arts Exhibit, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

Mishler, E. (1990). Validation in inquiry-guided research: The role of exemplars in narrative studies. *Harvard Educational Review, 60*, 415-442.

Peshkin, A. (1986). *God's choice: The total world of a fundamentalist Christian school*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Polkinghorne, D. E. (1988). *Narrative knowing and the human sciences*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Shaw, C. R. (1930). *The jack-roller: A delinquent boy's own story*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Spong, J. S. (1991). *Rescuing the Bible from fundamentalism: A bishop rethinks the meaning of scripture*. New York: HarperCollins.

Stodolsky, S. S. (1988). *The subject matters: Classroom activity in math and social studies*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Stuart, J. (1949). *The thread that runs so true*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

Thomas, W. I., & Znaniecki, F. (1927). *The Polish peasant in Europe and America*. New York: Knopf.

Tolstoy, L. (1912). *Childhood, boyhood, and youth*. (C. J. Hogarth, Trans.). New York: Dutton.

Tompkins, J. P. (Ed.) (1980). *Reader-response criticism: From formalism to post-structuralism*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Wahlberg, D. (1996, October 30). Fraud case at U-M may spark expulsion. *The Ann Arbor News*, pp. A1, A8.

Winner, I. P. (1978). Cultural semiotics and anthropology. In R. W. Bailey, L. Matejka, & P. Steiner (Eds.), *The sign: Semiotics around the world*, pp. 335-363. Ann Arbor, MI: Michigan Slavic Publications.

Witherell, C., & Noddings, N. (Eds.) (1991). *Stories lives tell: Narrative and dialogue in education*. New York: Teachers College Press.